

Differentiating Instruction for ELLs

With the recent emphasis on standards-based instruction, there has been much discussion about what constitutes appropriate content, instruction, and assessment for English language learners. As educators have grappled with this issue, it has become clear that educational parity can only be achieved if ELLs have an opportunity to learn the same rigorous academic content as native English speakers. The best way to achieve that goal is through differentiated instruction that takes into account ELLs' English language proficiency, as well as the many other factors that can impact learning (Fairbairn & Jones-Vo, 2010).

Differentiated instruction, by definition, is instruction that is designed to support individual students' learning in a classroom of students with varied backgrounds and needs. For this reason, the same general principles that apply to differentiated instruction for native English speakers also apply to ELLs.

Teachers are successful at differentiating instruction for ELLs when they:

- **Get to know as much as possible about each student** — ELLs represent a wide range of academic skills, interests, languages, English language proficiency levels, and cultures. The more a teacher can learn about each student's background, the better prepared s/he is to provide appropriate instruction for that student.
- **Have high expectations for all students** — Content should not be "watered down" for students who are still developing English language skills. Creative teachers think of ways to help students understand key material and "show what they know" in ways that match their language proficiency levels.
- **Have a variety of research-based instructional strategies at hand** — Experienced teachers know that "one-size-fits-all" instruction is rarely successful. There are many different learning profiles in any given classroom, and students learn best when instruction matches their needs and learning styles.
- **Use ongoing assessment to guide instruction** — Ongoing, informal assessment is vitally important to matching instruction to students' changing needs.
- **Provide multiple types of assessment** — matching assessment to students' learning profiles and language proficiency ensures that every student has an opportunity to demonstrate what he/she knows.
- **Differentiate homework** — If all students have the same homework assignments, some are doing busy work while others are struggling with work that they cannot possibly complete successfully (Tomlinson, 2005).
- **Collaborate** — Instruction is most successful when all of the professionals who work with ELLs work together
- **Use flexible grouping** — Small group instruction is a very effective way of making sure that all students can access important content, and keeping groups flexible allows teachers to match students with different peers for different types of activities.
- **Make content comprehensible for all students** (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008) — Providing ELLs with alternative ways of accessing key content (e.g., charts, books written in their first language, simplified text written by the teacher, discussion, etc.) allows them to learn the same material as other students as they continue to develop their English language skills.